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Commentary: ‘I do remember being hungry’ – Ophelia’s ‘i-poem’

JULIE PARSONS

Introduction

I conducted a series of asynchronous online interviews on the topic of food over the life-course with 75 respondents (49 women and 26 men) over 9 months in 2011. These auto/biographical food narratives clearly demonstrate how our everyday foodways (ways of doing food) are simultaneously individual and social; they position us in time and space (Parsons 2014a; 2015a).

After several levels of analysis running concurrently with data collection and beyond, five broad themes were identified and verified within the data: family, maternal, embodiment, health and epicurean foodways, which are explored fully elsewhere (Parsons 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016). For the purposes of this commentary I focus on Ophelia, a 53 year old children’s author, married with two children. Her narrative raises both personal and wider social issues that relate directly to the theme of this special issue, as ‘all of us at different times and in different places have been both offerers or withholders and receivers or refusers of food’ (Adlam and Turner, this Issue, Editorial Introduction).

I introduce readers/listeners to Ophelia’s narrative through the use of the i-poem, which is presented here in its entirety, along with an audio version, as the power of the i-poem is intensified when it is spoken/listened to. When listening to the i-poem, it is worth noting the contested boundaries and contradictions that form the basis of Ophelia’s subjective experiences alongside a wider social commentary on ‘offering food ↔ receiving food’.

The i-poem

The use of the i-poem is one element of the Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM) developed by Mauthner and Doucet (1998), from Gilligan (1982). One of the aims of

the method is to prioritise the voice of the narrator above that of the researcher, whilst acknowledging the researcher's story. It belongs to a social constructionist, epistemological position that recognises that human experience is bound up within larger relational dynamics. VCRM centres on the 'voice' of the respondent and is associated with a 'feminist interpretative lens', one in which the 'self is viewed as having multiple selves or voices, in contrast and conflict with one another (having many subjectivities)' (Balan, 2005:65).

When following this method, the researcher is encouraged to conduct four readings of the text. The focus of this commentary is on the second part of the first reading and the i-poem, in which the 'I', 'we' and 'you' statements are identified. These are highlighted in order to illustrate how the respondent may think, feel or speak within the text. These statements are taken out of the transcript and positioned in the order in which they appear in the text to create an i-poem (or I, we and you poem).

Ophelia's i-poem is created from an asynchronous online interview conducted over a few weeks at the beginning of 2011. It is part of a broader three year doctoral study entitled 'Ourfoodstories@email.com', an Auto/Biographical Study of relationships with Food (Parsons 2014a). The i-poem is reproduced in its entirety below and can be listened to: <https://soundcloud.com/user-468199656/julie-parsons-ophelias-i-poem>.

13:54: 17th January

I'd be very happy to participate

17:35: 20th January

I've done a foody blah

I may

MY FOOD STORY

I do remember being hungry

We had no central heating

We lived outside all day

We didn't eat between meals

I knew my mother was a brilliant cook

We ate

I remember her long shopping lists

I sat on the stairs

I could buy black jacks, pear drops,

I loved sweets, especially chocolate

We weren't allowed sweets on any other day of the week ever.

We all ate the same food together

We were all paying attention

I was allowed to watch but

I never made a cake or anything with my Mum

I could lick the bowl

I remember tasting things

I never got to eat them as part of a meal

We ate a lot of tinned fruit

I remember their sweet and grainy texture

I would still eat both types of meat

I hated them

I don't remember eating any salad

We grew ourselves

We regularly ate

We had an orchard full of plum trees

I still have a hole in my knee

I ran from a wasp

I have fond memories of peeling hard-boiled eggs

We had warm strawberries in little straw pallets

I don't think

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I have ever tasted such delicious strawberries in my life since.

I was permanently hungry

I stayed with her

I was never forced to eat food

I didn't like

You didn't finish your main course

I didn't want it there was nothing else

I was always so hungry

I usually ate it anyway

I had so many baked beans

I would never ever eat them now.

My mother died

I was 12

I hate tinned soup

I found

I put this in because

I looked

I wasn't over weight

I was, if not a beauty, pretty enough

I was fat.

I sat sipping water mortified

I started to drink coffee in my bedroom with sugar in it

I could

I knew it didn't help me

I couldn't help it

I still struggle

I failed Home Economics O level

I tried hard with my pea and ham soup

I was ashamed at my ineptitude

I really wasn't interested in proper nutritious food

Cooking wasn't something I ever did

I went to live in London

I was 18

I had to look after myself

I ate very poorly

I was permanently on a diet

I never believed

I was thin

I know that

I don't have a thin body shape

I longed for

I don't remember shopping for food

I must have eaten something

I was busy

I often ate a sandwich lunch

I didn't bother with supper

I went through a phase of 'Lean Cuisine'

I liked

I felt it was helping

I never felt thin

I wanted to

I look back

I was really slim

I only really began to cook when

I bought my first flat

I could entertain people

I wasn't a very good cook

I really tried

I enjoyed it

I got better

I don't remember having much of a relationship with food

I have always loved fruit

I baked bread quite a lot

I was good at that

I loved doing it

I was also doing a lot of sport

I was very fit

I could pretty much eat

I wanted.

I was very, very thin

I got married

I had been extremely ill

I had to put on weight to get pregnant

I really fancied pale foods

I craved vinegary beetroot

We always ate well

I fed my children organic food

I put in my body

I am postmenopausal

I need to eat less to stay the same weight

I am definitely happiest at the slimmer end of the scale

I look better

I feel in control

I have always had a love/hate relationship with bread

I love it

I gave it up entirely

I could keep my weight pretty static

I liked

I found it too hard

I find giving up sugar hard

I love them

I have become much more confident
I balance the weekly meals
We have a lot of salad.
I have been trying to cook less meat
I cook them most evenings
I don't eat carbs myself, unless
We are all sharing
I try not to eat sweet things
I give them up completely
I start I just can't stop
I know it's ridiculous
I am not remotely interested in crisps
I couldn't care less if
I never had another one

I don't like
I can't stand
I could never contemplate eating
I like food with separate grains
I love avocados,
I would never, ever drink a glass of milk
I do like Greek yoghurt
I love some cheeses
Eggs I think they are an amazing food, so clever!
I love olive oil
I love to cook for people
I especially love to bake for people
I care about

18:42: 21st January

I realize
I have left out

13:30: 25th January

Me thinking

I wrote

My last epistle

I am really not very interested in food

I do love to feed others

I have never been

I am

I look bigger and this

I think has been my biggest problem

I look bigger than

I really am underneath

If I was rich and

I wasn't worried

I would book a reduction tomorrow

My mother died

I turned 12

I lost a lot of weight very quickly

I found them withering on about it

I saw it

I didn't want to eat much

I didn't see the problem

I had just lost my appetite

I certainly wasn't doing it on purpose

I also had delayed puberty

I already wore a simple bra

I was about 15

I was 16

I realized

I left out

I was at boarding school

You will imagine

I wasn't there for the food

I was hungry a lot of the time

I didn't like

I don't remember minding about the food

I genuinely think

I just wasn't interested

I don't like British food much

I do remember eating very little deliberately

We used to whisper about anorexia

We were discriminating against fat people in our little world

We all ate sweets

We could

We didn't seem to make the correlation between sugar and body fat

We were extremely active

We went there and back at least three times a day

We did sport everyday

I must have been 16

I was in the mirror

I was struggling with puppy fat

I now know was emotional padding

I ate anything

I ate naughty foods when

I wasn't with her

I had a new friend

We became close

I met her

I hadn't really thought about it

I saw Lottie recently

I still have her letters to me

I spend a lot of time reassuring her

I became pretty obsessive

I quite liked what

I saw

I hated it

I had a beautiful friend

I was still struggling with this all over puppy fat padding

I felt invisible

I worshipped

I felt like

I lived on another planet

I remember my stepmother

I thought

I replicated this behaviour

I went to London

I got a lot of leering

I hated them

I felt they were me

I had nothing else to offer

I wasn't doing well at school

I knew

I would flunk my O'levels

I didn't believe in myself

What I had to offer

I would never eat anything like chocolate

We didn't have celebrity culture

I still knew

I didn't look good enough

I just wasn't good enough

I think back

I can see that

I am

I am a bit podgy

I was sent to live in France

I was just 17

I didn't want to go

I was terrified

I knew

I just had to get on with it

I discovered

I loved food

I took responsibility for my body

I came back

I had grown

I had stretched out

I was back eating badly

I had to get away

I went to London

I never went back

I may be going

I do find

I want to ensure

I did

I can see

I don't know

I have faced the same

I have a good eye

I really empathize

We have found

I have noticed

I think a lot

I never did

I still don't

I try to teach

I never ever criticize

I do tell her

I make a rule

I would never lie

I think she has

I always ask the question back

I agree

I try to turn it

I have noticed

We don't use the word DIET

I have banned it

I don't know

I don't want

I think she is beautiful

I tell her so regularly

We have had many tears

I do feel guilty

I think

I have to stop myself

As I would be of myself

I want her always to feel

I know she knows

I don't believe

I much prefer to feed others

Than to feed myself

13:58: 25th January

I am truthful

I never liked my body much

I think my face

I don't have

I find dressing

I can cover up

I got a lot of cellulite

I don't feel confident

I need to keep cool

I grow older

I find it harder and harder

I would never wear shorts

I have worked it out

I can look a bit ridiculous

I don't have the confidence

I am too hard on myself

I thought

I looked OK

I got into my tankini

We were house sitting

I thought

I looked terrible

I felt my self confidence drain away

I felt old and lumpy

I started to eat things

I normally wouldn't

I suddenly didn't care what

I put in to my body

I continued to eat

I just couldn't stop eating

I was dealing with a new feeling

I am 53

I am now

I had to get a grip

I hated the feeling

I look at photographs
I often hated them at the time
Now I wish
I could look like that again

I bet you are just wishing
I had taken the easy route, done
You a list of foods
I liked
I didn't

Your old screwball
You'll never

15:27: 1st February

I feel
I have never tried to harm my body
I have high expectations
I think
I have a strong body
I feel fit
I am proud of my body
I'm just

I don't get it
I'd like
I think a lot
I had lots of problems
I was breast-feeding
I got an abscess
I had to carry on
I believe

I think

I have a pretty healthy body
I just don't like the way it looks
I am aging
I am at that point
I am about to
I don't want to
I feel lucky
I have looked after it
I haven't been to the gym
I have taken care of myself
I have friends
I don't
I wake up
I don't drink much
I hardly drink at all
I have a sensitive system
I listen to it
I can
I don't like the alternative
I want to feel well

I think energy
I am describing someone young
I think
We associate health with youth
I am not sure
We don't see them
I guess they
We all know what
We should be eating
I think body and mind
You
You feel about yourself

I have seen

09:01: 4th February

I fear

We are lost!

Commentary

Ophelia's i-poem clearly demonstrates how powerful the double arrow between the two positions of offering ↔ receiving food can be. Ophelia is telling a story where she is without maternal love and nurturance and this is all embodied through food (and lack of it). Food is used to both nurture (others) and to punish (self) in a pattern of 'self-sabotage', established in childhood. There are therefore two interrelated issues at the heart of Ophelia's account. First, 'offering' food is associated with maternal identity, with becoming a 'good' mother who serves salad, cooks organic food and eats 'carbs' if sharing a meal. Secondly, 'refusing' food is part of a story about an embodied self that seeks control in order to manage feelings of self-loathing through self-care.

In the first instance, when considering the notion of 'offering' food as a symbol of 'good' mothering, Ophelia's mother 'refuses' to share the lavish and exotic food she prepares for guests at her dinner parties in the 1970s. Instead Ophelia only tastes partial offerings from the inside of a mixing bowl and is served monotonous, insubstantial British food that leaves her hungry and longing for more. Then when her mother dies of breast cancer, Ophelia at the age of 12 refuses to eat altogether, symbolising the complete end of any possibility of maternal nurturance. This 'loss of appetite' delays her puberty and the development of a woman's body. Indeed, her body (her breasts especially, which she sees as responsible for so much 'leering') and food become a lifelong struggle for her.

Ophelia further identifies 'lack' of nurturance through food from her stepmother and even her grandmother: 'I was permanently hungry when I stayed with her'. Later, she attempts to counter the effects of maternal loss through her efforts at nurturing others, making and giving food away as gifts and feeding her children organic food. She is

looking for lost love and nurturance and trying to be a vehicle of it in a way neither her mother nor stepmother were. Indeed, throughout her life she craves nourishment for herself whilst admitting that she doesn't really like food very much at all. She prefers to feed others rather than herself.

Julie Parsons is a sociology lecturer and author of 'Gender, Class and Food, families, bodies and health' (Palgrave MacMillan 2015). Her research interests are in the areas of food, the body, health, gender, maternal identities and culture, as well as auto/biographical and feminist approaches to research. She has recently been awarded a Sociology of Health & Illness (SHI) Mildred Blaxter Post-Doctoral Fellowship for 12 months from September 2015, looking at commensality (eating together) as a tool for health, well-being, social inclusion and community resilience. She is a member of the European Sociological Association (ESA), the British Sociological Association (BSA), the BSA Food Study Group and the BSA Auto/Biography study group.

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